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Universal Design 101

With thoughtful planning and a little technological help, builders can help buyers better access both their living spaces and a more full life.

The home building industry needs to find a new name for "universal design." At least that's the opinion of Mike McGowan, president of Binghamton, N.Y.-based [McGowan Corp.](#) and a past chair of the NAHB 50+ Housing Council, who spoke Wednesday morning at the "Universal Design: Affordable Alternatives for Builders and Remodelers" education session at the International Builders' Show going on this week in Orlando, Fla.

His suggestions for a new title included: "designs for all"; "easy living"; or just "common sense."

"At our company, we call it 'making homes livable for a lifetime.' We tell them once you're in, you're going to be able to stay," he said.

McGowan is determined to disprove myths about universal design, the first being that it increases costs. "I don't do anything if it doesn't make dollars and cents for the return," he said, pointing to many cost-neutral product swaps that improve a home's ease of use, such as using 2/8 doors.

Adopting universal design has also saved his company money on marketing costs, he said. Thanks to relationships with his town's local office for aging residents and a local legislator who was pushing for a larger presence in the community for seniors, McGowan said he's been able to establish himself as the go-to universal design expert in his area.

But while 50+ buyers are universal design's primary market, McGowan and the session's two other presenters emphasized that its features are appealing to everyone. "Young mothers have become my second-biggest fans," he said, pointing to features such as light switches at 42 inches that allow a child to reach them, nightlights incorporated into bathroom fans, and lever door handles that assist both arthritic hands and someone holding a sleeping child.

Other features he incorporates include contrasting colors at level changes, including steps and countertops; features that cut back on the need to bend or reach, such as extendable faucets over cooktops, and raised dishwashers; and fashionable grab bars (some of which don't require blocking).

Because the kitchen usually serves as the heart of a home, Sara Reep, a designer at [Masco Cabinetry](#), stressed the possibilities universal design holds for taking

accessibility beyond making it easier to access a doorway or stovetop to include making it easier for everyone to interact. Staggered-height counters and islands, for example, give children a reachable height and offer a seated space so elderly family members or guests can be a part of the action.

She also recommended including two cleanup areas so multiple cooks can be at work, with at least one sink accessible for a person with a physical limitation.

And as much as Boomers hate to admit it, aging usually comes with increased healthcare needs, which Laurie Orlov, founder of [Aging in Place Technology Watch](#), believes can be better met through implementing home technology.

She gave the examples of sensor systems that monitor doorways, so that if a person enters a room and doesn't come out, a professional is notified; and fall detection systems that can operate within 600 feet of a person's home.

"Technology can enable the user to live their best possible life," Orlov said. "What we want to see is all these market silos meld together."

Such a coordinated effort could also be a powerful source of referrals for builders if they are working together with home-health and companion-care agencies, local medical equipment providers, and transportation services.

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